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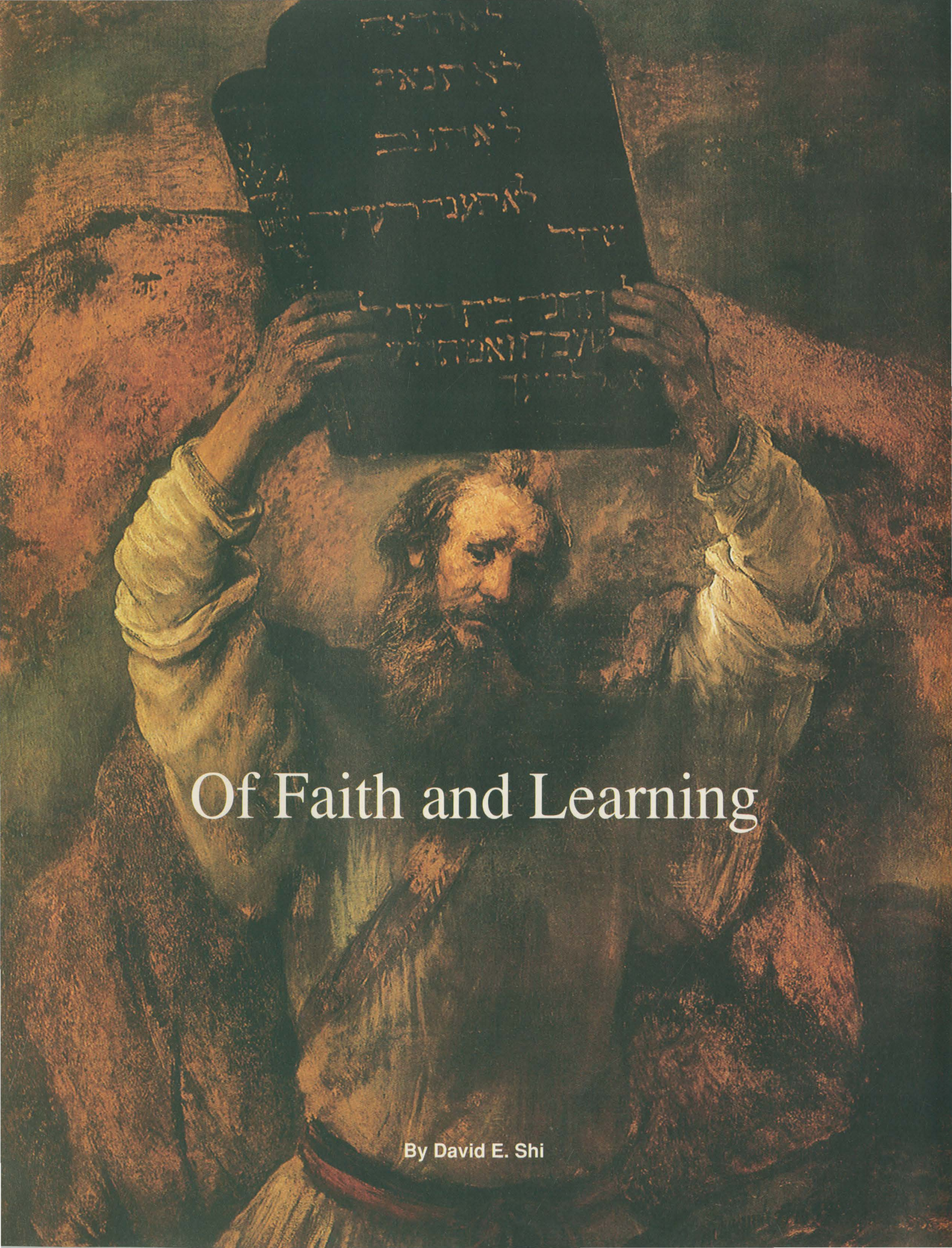

Of Faith and Learning

By David E. Shi



How does a college with a deeply embedded religious tradition honor its heritage without succumbing to dogmatism?

What role should religion play in higher education? This complex and often volatile question has shaped American college life for over three centuries.

Most of the academies and colleges founded before the Civil War were narrowly sectarian in purpose and outlook. They were created primarily to train young men for the ministry and to instill piety and virtue in others.

Many of the denominational colleges were so aggressively orthodox that they openly restricted intellectual inquiry. Indiana Methodists, for example, declared in 1832 that their colleges would "exclude all doctrines which we deem dangerous." That same year, the Congregationalist minister who founded Oberlin College announced that the new school would combat "Romanists, atheists, Deists, Universalists, and all classes of God's enemies."

Several early denominational colleges, however, refused to be narrowly sectarian. Davidson College, for instance, announced its intention in 1837 "to educate youth of all classes without any regard to the distinction of religious denominations." Furman was equally ecumenical. It welcomed "any youth . . . without regard to sect or denomination" and promised an educational experience based on "principles of Christian liberality, and in favor of the rights of private judgment."

Such explicit religious commitment has been manifested in many ways at church-related colleges. During the 19th century, most college presidents and trustees were ministers. Students were required to take courses in religion and to attend daily chapel services.

Colleges were viewed as wholesome bastions of reverent virtue. Campus social life was strictly regulated; curfews and dress codes for women helped keep passions in check. Church-related colleges often required faculty and staff members to be professing Christians and members of the supporting denomination. Trustees occasionally ordered dissenting professors fired and closely monitored the curriculum; controversial subjects such as Darwinism were prohibited on many campuses. Many of these attributes of church-related colleges survived well into the 20th century and are still prevalent on some campuses.

Today, however, the landscape of higher education is greatly changed. The 800 colleges and universities that began with church support now represent a wide spectrum of practice and belief and serve quite different constituencies. On one end of the spectrum are the fundamentalist "Bible colleges" such as Liberty University, Oral Roberts University and Bob Jones University. On the other end of the continuum are the Ivy League colleges and universities that were founded by churchmen but have abandoned any explicit religious commitments. Harvard, for example, started in 1636 by Puritans and named for a popular minister, changed its motto in the early 19th century from *In Christi gloriam* ("For the Glory of Christ") to *Veritas* ("Truth").

Most church-related and church-founded colleges fall between these two perspectives. Since the turbulent 1960s, an accelerating commitment to academic freedom and institutional competitiveness has led many colleges to abandon religious restrictions on the hiring of faculty and staff and to highlight their nonsectarian emphasis in the recruiting of students. Financial challenges facing churches as well as colleges have required institutions to broaden their base of support beyond the parent denomination. The growing pluralism of American society and dramatic changes in cultural mores have led many colleges to relax or abandon traditional social regulations. Likewise, increased understanding and appreciation of world religions have led many denominational colleges to broaden their curricular emphases beyond Christianity.

By the last decade of the 20th century, it had become increasingly difficult for liberal arts colleges of national stature to maintain their traditional commitment to faith and to learning. Persistent tensions between the demands of denominational control and the desire for institutional independence erupted in periodic controversies that eroded the formal bonds between church and college.

Much of academe has come to look with disdain upon the parochialism of religious orthodoxy and denominational affiliations. Colleges that try to sustain historical religious ties have often fought a losing battle against the forces of secular rationalism. Many professors want to divorce Jerusalem from Athens, the judgment of reason from the stirrings of the spirit.

At the same time, some



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advocates of traditional church-relatedness argue that many of the schools claiming a spiritual commitment are living a lie. "Not only are schools not Christian," says Notre Dame professor George Marsden, "but it's difficult to get the Christian point of view into the classroom." To be sure, secular values have triumphed on many campuses, but this does not mean that colleges with explicit religious commitments cannot flourish.

At colleges such as Davidson, Duke, Johnson C. Smith and Furman, religious activity and spiritual reflection are vibrantly alive and more pluralistic than ever. In this regard, our campuses reflect larger social trends. We live in a postmodern age skeptical of truth and gorged on the trivial, yet still hungry for meaning and moorings. A majority of Americans — particularly young Americans — are searching for spiritual insight in this new century. A recent *Newsweek* poll reveals that 76 percent of Americans believe that the United States is "in a steep moral and spiritual decline." Many college students feel directionless and are groping for a moral compass.

Yet there are signs of spiritual renewal in the younger generation. Many students want a holistic educational experience; they recognize that there is more to life than earning a livelihood. Religious activities are increasing across the country, and college students are eager to participate in faith communities. Bible-study and prayer groups are flourishing, as are student religious organizations representing all denominations and religions. Says the Rev. Ian Oliver, chaplain at Bucknell University, "larger and larger numbers of students are coming to traditional religious services on campus."

Such renewed religious activism does have a dark side. Colleges across the nation report that some evangelical student groups are so intent on converting their peers that they are engaging in harassing activities and displaying an ugly intolerance toward those who spurn their proselytizing efforts. (See page 20.)

So how does a college with a deeply embedded religious tradition honor its heritage without succumbing to dogmatism? How can liberal learning coexist with strong convictions? This is the rub.

For its part, Furman continues to bear insistent witness to its Judeo-Christian heritage by encouraging students, faculty and staff to grow in faith as they grow in knowledge. Nineteen religious organizations serve the diverse interests of student seekers. The university's Religion-in-Life lecture series helps participants engage the moral and religious aspects of contemporary issues. Speakers in the series address a diverse array of spiritual and moral topics and open the floor to discussion and debate afterward. Every Sunday the Daniel Memorial Chapel hosts two worship services. The morning service is distinctly ecumenical, and in the evening the Roman Catholic community celebrates Mass. Students play a major role in producing and conducting these services.

Still another opportunity for shared discussion and reflection about spiritual issues is the What Really Matters lecture series, which invites faculty, staff and alumni to share their core beliefs with the community. In addition, the newly established Center for Theological Exploration of Vocation, funded by the Lilly Endowment, provides opportunities for students, faculty, alumni and the greater community to reflect on the intersection of personal theological assumptions and vocational choices. The center's programs encourage dialogue among differing disciplines and religious perspectives and seek to stimulate and inform social action.

In its essence, faith is a journey that involves the continuous making and remaking of meaning. Such a strenuous quest for truth and insight is best fostered not by doctrinal decree or pious posturing but by the living example of transformed human beings, reflective people who recognize that they do not have all the answers.

"Faith leads us beyond ourselves," said Pope John Paul II. He recognized that the essence of God-likeness is mission, and Furman has long encouraged its students, faculty and staff to enact their faith through a keen sense of social concern and a vital spirit of voluntarism. Students enact their convictions by working as volunteers in one of 90 social service agencies in Greenville.

These types of programs are not unique to Furman. Other church-founded liberal arts colleges offer similar opportunities for exchanging ideas and professing



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beliefs in a spirit of communion and humility.

Such free and open engagement with a God who transcends church and creed can be transforming, but is not always painless. The Danish theologian Soren Kierkegaard once said that he wrote religious essays to make life more difficult for people — to dispel the delusion that a life of faith is easy. Likewise, we want our students to wrestle with what it means to embrace or reject a faith, and to express through their words and actions what they believe and value.

Perhaps the most important lesson of liberal learning in a spiritual context is the realization that religion in its essence is not a flight from reality or reason but a quite human effort to understand ourselves and our world. In the words of Teilhard de Chardin, the visionary French Jesuit, "Faith is not a call to escape the world, but to embrace it."

We are often sustained by beliefs that we do not fully fathom yet cannot do without. Such engagement with the mystery of the unseen, however imperfect, however fitfully realized, gives substance and ballast to a learning community. And it fulfills our shared mission to nurture students who are quick of mind and generous of soul.

What role should religion play in liberal learning? It should encourage and enliven our passion for service, our pursuit to truth, our attentive caring for young people, and our commitment to academic excellence. It should also extend the reach of our concerns beyond the Christian community to the whole of society. All of these noble initiatives are expressions of our humble but earnest commitment to love and serve God and humanity with all our heart and soul, mind and strength.

This article is reprinted with permission from Issues, *a publication of The Duke Endowment. David E. Shi, president of Furman, is the author of* The Bell Tower and Beyond: Reflections on Learning and Living, *published this spring by the University of South Carolina Press.* *(See page 41.)*

The college as prophet

Furman's 1987 Report of the Institutional Self-Study *includes a section titled "Christian Ideals and Character," which attempts to define the appropriate relationship between church and college. While the following excerpt from the report was written when Furman was still affiliated with the South Carolina Baptist Convention, it remains a thought-provoking assessment of how church and college can work together as "partners in the search for truth." Authorship is credited to Robert W. Crapps, now professor emeritus of religion.*

The model of prophet is helpful in defining connections between Christianity and liberal learning, the church and the school. Ancient Israel maintained priest and king as protectors of the religious establishment, but also the prophet, whose obligation was to no religio-political structures. The prophet functioned to maintain self-criticism, and his role was protected from the whims of those who conserved. When the prophet changed his function to suit priest or king, he thwarted the role of prophet.

At its best, the Christian college serves the prophetic function. Its master is no set definition of truth, even Christian affirmations about truth, but the unhindered pursuit of rightness even at the risk of undermining the establishment. Further, the church with great risks encourages criticism of its most cherished structures, institutional or creedal, and supports such a college without obligating it to the tradition. The community of faith has a right to receive healthy teaching unrestricted by dogma; the liberal arts college has the responsibility to teach without dogmatically or iconoclastically destroying the tradition.

Both Christianity and liberal learning presuppose that given creeds, religious or academic, are at best heuristic statements about God and truth. Each, therefore, approaches its distinctive task with modesty and graceful understanding of the other. In this sense they are partners in the search for truth, affirmers of talent, and encouragers of pilgrims who move toward confident, free and courageous lives with reverence for the God of creation.

In sum, the relationship between the "Christian" church and the "Christian" college respects each the most when the connection is philosophical and theological, not creedal and programmatic. Church supports college to affirm that God is larger than answers already in and thereby keeps itself open to change; college pursues humanistic learning with faithfulness, vigor and openness to affirm that the discovery of true humanity is in fact divine revelation.